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From Necrotic to Apoptotic Debt

Using Kristeva to Think Differently about Puerto Rico's Bankruptcy

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According to Kristeva, the maternal hold is a state of entanglement, which both embodies the cellular process of apoptosis and refuses to collapse in its face. She defines apoptosis as "*la mort cellulaire que sculpte le vivant*."¹ Kristeva is indebted to Jean Claude Ameisen for her definition of this process. In his book, *La Sculpture du Vivant: Le Suicide cellulaire ou la Mort créatrice* (1999), Ameisen writes that the body in general and the embryo in particular depend on the interaction between what he calls "maternal proteins" and the DNA contained in the "maternal" inseminated egg cell.² He further argues that this interaction produces massive cellular death as a matter of course, which in turn gives shape to the embryo and to the body by adjusting, shrinking, modeling and pruning both. Ameisen explains that apoptosis is a more natural and discrete process of cellular death than necrosis. An implosion of the cell characterizes apoptosis, which implosion causes no lesions in the surrounding cells. It is programmed cellular suicide. It is neither anarchic nor spectacular. Carl Vogt discovered apoptosis in 1842 and Walther Flemming illustrated it 1885.³

Ameisen emphasizes that apoptosis depends on communication or signals between the cells, which communication interacts with the instructions inside the DNA for the cell to commit suicide. In other words, apoptosis is the process by which the cells carry out a suicide for which they are programmed, but they carry out the suicide only after they receive a signal to execute the instructions, or after they fail to receive a signal that inhibits the drive to suicide. Kristeva states that the maternal hold is on secret and familiar terms with this merciless process of massive cell suicide, which is responsible not only for the development of the external parts of the embryo (such as fingers of the hand and the toes of the feet), but also for our immune and our nervous systems. By this familiarity, Kristeva suggests that the maternal hold

is our archaic forgiving attitude towards apoptosis rather than an odious and necrotic approach to our beginnings.

Kristeva, partly echoing Ameisen's emphasis on signals, language, and communication at the cellular level, also argues that the maternal hold is a refusal to collapse in the face of apoptosis. This refusal, she adds is not a mere resistance against our cellular and biological predisposition to suicide. Neither is this refusal a neurotic nor a paranoid form of defense against what amounts to a built-in and originary negativity. Instead, this refusal to collapse is a capacity to be "alone," paradoxically understood not as solitude, but as an archaic and primitive bond to an uncanny other. This refusal is a capacity to accompany the living through the threat of mortality up to death. It is an aptitude to sublimate loss or wounds. This refusal to collapse is a form of tenacity. All the embryonic cells involved in the process of apoptosis show this tenacity. In the vernacular, we associate tenacity with strength and courage, but Kristeva further associates it with tenderness. A musical language, or the chords of sacred works like the "Stabat Mater" by Palestrina, Pergolesi, Haydn, and Rossini, sublimate this tender tenacity in the Christian tradition that is so important to Kristeva.⁴ The Latin verse "*Stabat Mater dolorosa iuxta crucem lacrimosa dum pendebat Filius*," which means "the suffering mother was standing," and which refers to the grieving Virgin Mother who stands besides the cross where her Son dies, crucified, similarly sublimates this archaic tenacity. "'Stabat Mater': (Kristeva insists) elle tient."⁵

For Kristeva, the archaic maternal hold, which is contained and communicated even at the cellular level, is what sets off all future cycles of sublimation. The maternal hold is the zero-degree of sublimation in that it is a lesson in redirection rather than execution or repression of the processes of suicide and massive destruction, even extinction, that lie at the origins of our embodied selves. Sublimation is our ultimate shield when death stares us in the face, when there is no possibility of communication: "the subtle gamut of sound, touch, and visual traces, older than language and newly worked out."⁶

As the zero-degree of sublimation, the maternal hold is also the training ground for a form of ethics that Kristeva calls a herethical ethics: "that which in life makes bonds, thoughts, and therefore the thought of death, bearable, herethics is undeath [*a-mort*], love."⁷ This form of ethics questions the divine and transcendental law, and does not place absolute value on eternal life. This form of ethics also questions the dogma of purity and salvation, and the accompanying goals of development and progress, generally associated with the secular humanistic project, and more particularly with the society and the culture of the spectacle. Rather than simply call them odious, the herethical ethics of the maternal hold acknowledges our deadly, toxic, and even fatal beginnings, and reveals our capacity to withstand, to accompany, and to recognize our complicity in them, in massive death, and perhaps even in the future extinction that characterizes our mortal species. The maternal hold is

the zero-degree of a cycle of sublimations that redirects these vexed beginnings into forms of expression, into works of art.

Without the maternal hold, without its heretical ethics and sublimation, without the stability (fragile as it may be) that this hold can bring, we are melancholically or defensively driven to commit the most heinous acts of atrocity and violence in the name of eternal life, development, and progress. For the most part, Kristeva has described the combination of personal loss and social, cultural, and historical pressures brought to bear on the vexed (but ultimately successful) sublimation of the maternal hold by artists like Giovanni Bellini.⁸ More recently, however, her attention has turned to contemporary examples, to suggest that our fixation with the obscene might have to do with an arrested form of sublimation. In a short film that coincides with the publication of her 2011 essay on the maternal hold, Kristeva claims that the catastrophic loss of this ambivalent principle is what characterized the rise of National Socialism in Germany during the nineteen thirties. And according to Kristeva, the loss of the maternal hold under the Nazi regime is at the center of German Expressionism in general, and at the core of works like *Birth* (1937) and *Death* (1938) by Max Beckmann in particular. Such works, she claims, allow us to see the fragmentation, the catastrophic abjection, of the maternal hold itself, of its heretical ethics, and of its longstanding tradition of sublimation. In other words, according to Kristeva, the paintings by Beckmann sublimate the loss of the maternal hold itself. They are examples of a *Sacred Family*, a *Pietà*, or a *Dormition* that have undergone a radical transformation. They are representations of a society, a culture, indeed a world, that is losing its maternal hold; a world that is losing both its heretical ethics, and the capacity to sublimate its apoptotic inheritance. They are paintings that represent a necrotic unbinding of the maternal hold. An obscenity characterizes the mummies at their center. And Kristeva associates this obscenity with a death-drive run amok. “Beckmann allows us to see more than the death of the maternal, he shows us the death of the hold, rebinding or reliance.”⁹

Following Kristeva, I will put Eduardo Lalo’s book of poems and drawings *Necrópolis* (2014) in a tradition of representation of the maternal hold that is close to a thousand years old. This tradition goes from the confrontation with nothingness in Theophane the Greek’s *Dormition* (1392) to the modern matricide represented in Pablo Picasso’s *Maternity Apple* (1971).

Eduardo Lalo is a writer from Puerto Rico and the author of more than thirteen books, the latest of which is *Intemperie* (2017). He is the winner of the 2013 International Rómulo Gallegos prize for his novel *Simone*, translated into English in 2015 by David Frye. His works are eclectic assemblages of texts that put into question the purity of artistic practices including film, photography, drawing, and painting, as well as the difference between literary genres including, poetry, essay writing, fiction writing, and autobiography.

Considered from the tradition of representation of the maternal hold, *Necrópolis*, the recent collection of poems and drawings by Lalo, is another example of a work that is expressive of the increasing loss of the maternal hold by our contemporary culture. Similarly, *Necrópolis* is also an example of the increasing failure to articulate a heretical ethics, and to repeat the cycles of sublimation that are necessary to transform our apoptotic natures. As such, the poems and drawings of *Necrópolis* are symptomatic effects of our contemporary society. Significantly, however, *Necrópolis* is also proof of the resilience, presence, and promise of the maternal hold, even under the strained conditions of colonialism. From this perspective, the book is an antidote against both the apoptotic material that constitutes us and against the disavowal of our apoptotic inheritance.

The first two sections of *Necrópolis* titled “Fines del mundo” and “Exilios”, are particularly representative of what I would call the holding pattern, or the pattern of holding, that characterizes not only the poetic subject of *Necrópolis*, but also constitutes his inheritance, or what remains, after the father of the poetic subject is gone. Of these poems, perhaps the most poignant is “De un sueño queda la noción de un padre” [“The Idea of a Father Remains After a Dream”].¹⁰ The poem is a sublimation of what remains after a dream that returns the poet to the scene where his father dies. The dream that remains and the poem that follows it are elaborations of something that happens in that death scene, something that the poetic subject compares to a cyst in the unconscious, but also to a *nacido*, which in Spanish means both a new born, and a boil, an infection of the skin full of pus. At the center of this scene, or point of un-intelligibility, there is an uncanny hold. The poem is about this hold, which is associated with the dead body of the father, and which body in the end releases its internal gases after death. This moment of release survives the death of the paternal body in life, in the dream, and then in the poem we are reading. It reminds the poetic subject of the lasting nature of the humanity of his father, contained in the ability of his body to hold, or as the poet puts it, to resist: “la perennidad de un padre / que resiste / sin vida” [“the hold of a father / that still resists / without life”].¹¹ This uncanny hold is the poet’s patrimony, and it is the apoptotic debt at the center of *Necrópolis*.

Necrópolis is an example of our profound debt to our organic bodies in general and to their apoptotic nature in particular. Lalo expresses a debt to the strangeness of life, to its strange pledge, bond or promise in his poems and drawings. They are examples of an organic form of writing that is full of contained emotion and feeling: songs (*canto*, *canciones*) or censures. They are also examples of an in-human form of writing that is almost animal, and is associated with a voice in a feral state. For example, the almost invisible trace of the hand, its vibration, its pressure on the page, and its force or pressure as the hand hits the keys of an old-style typewriter mark many of the drawings, and some of the titles and dedications of the book.

Another example of the embodied dimension of the book is the role of doodling (the *garabato*) in the composition of many of its figures. They are forms of drawing that are non-sense, and that follow the unconscious movement, the arrhythmia of the hand or fingers. Similarly, many of the poems are forms of echolalia or babbling, perhaps meant to remind us of the babbling of the infant, the eternally pre-linguistic and arrested Puerto Rican colonial subject.

In fact, *Necrópolis* reminds us that writing in its simplest form (as a trace of ink) is both a practice and an object made of organic and liquid material. The history of ink traces it back to the 23rd Century B.C. Vegetables and animals are some of its oldest components. Similarly, Lalo compares writing and ink to liquid dejections from the body. Whether it is a brackish and briny amniotic fluid about to give birth to something strange, or whether it is the water of life, a metaphor for semen, Lalo compares his writing (and by extension his books) to the organic material associated with life. However, the nature of the life he represents in *Necrópolis* is old, fatigued, on its last legs, and almost extinct. The material of this life is but a trace, a remainder, and remains at its limits. From this perspective, *Necrópolis* is an example of writing under pressure, and under erasure. And this erasure is the other inheritance of the subject of Lalo's writing: a colonial subject that has learned to write its own extinction. "La escritura incomprensible de una herencia de huecos," Lalo writes in *donde* ["The incomprehensible writing that is the patrimony of lack"].¹² The drawings of *Necrópolis* best represent this old lesson in self-undoing. These drawings not only resemble detached body parts such as eyes, moles, nipples or hands. They also repeat, make visible, and forgive the process of apoptosis, the archaic form of cell suicide: shrinkage, blebbing, and phagocytosis.¹³

Necrópolis is an example of our inheritance of colonial erasures, as Lalo puts it, but it is also an example of the sublimation of the maternal hold, which, as Kristeva reminds us, is intimately familiar with massive cell suicide, but refuses to collapse in its face. In his insightful commentary on Lalo's earlier 2005 book, *donde*, Juan Duchesne argues that the subject of that book is an ethical subject because it waits for and listens to something that will emerge after the failure of what he calls the sovereign subject of coloniality. The subject of *donde* waits and listens instead of forging ahead with the atrocities of a humanism that has gone awry, of a humanistic project that has devolved into a globalized colonialism and its society and culture of the spectacle. Duchesne associates an ethical form of waiting with an interruption of the flash that represents the spectacle of colonialism's imperial subjects. He finds that a photograph titled "Adónica and Diego", showing the then-wife of the author and his son, is a perfect example of this defensive attitude.¹⁴

Duchesne points out that the photograph is a contemporary version of the Renaissance composition of the Madonna and Child. (He calls the picture "The Madonna of *donde*".) As such, the photograph represents the beginning

of another cycle of sublimation in a long iconographic line inspired or learned from the maternal hold. The photograph is of a mother holding her infant in a defiant attitude. She clutches the infant to the breast, separating him from the photographer, and protecting him from the flash of his camera, even as she refuses to blink. She is a dangerous figure, with lightning bolts for eyes, looking straight at the camera, challenging the photographer to come closer if he dares. By the time Lalo comes around to writing *Necrópolis*, the cycle of sublimation has turned again, becoming smaller or more constrained. Arguably, the first drawing of the book, which we could title “The Madonna of *Necrópolis*,” is the best illustration of this constriction. It is the closest of the drawings to an anthropomorphic figure. It is a large and monstrous form standing or walking with what appears to be legs, attached to a torso with what appear to be breasts, and topped by what appears to be a head with eyes. Inside the figure, one can barely see one eye, two hands, and three legs that appear to be both separate and fused to the larger form. If “The Madonna of *donde*” defiantly holds her infant in the face of an intrusive society of the spectacle represented by the flash of the camera, “The Madonna of *Necrópolis*” takes a different pose. She struggles to hold itself together as a composite organism that wildly moves its fused extremities into impossible positions, even as its assembly of fragmented and almost detached body parts morphs into something else.¹⁵

Necrópolis is an example of a heretical ethics that questions the dogma of purity (racial and otherwise) and salvation, as well as the ideals of development, progress, and sovereignty that have governed the recent discourse about the debt of Puerto Rico. On June 28 of 2015, the former governor of Puerto Rico, Alejandro García Padilla, declared that the municipal debt of the island was unpayable.¹⁶ Perhaps in order to justify the need for immediate debt relief, the Governor also stated that the island was close to a “death spiral” to signal both the “threat” of a municipal bond default and the “threat” of mass-migration that would reach beyond the local economy of Puerto Rico to the larger economy of the United States. The so-called threat was not only in the form of toxic municipal bonds, but it was also in the form of waves of racialized migrants who are unwelcome in our current political climate. Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan, an Associate Counsel at Latino Justice for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund describes the debt of Puerto Rico as a five hundred year old odious debt. She resuscitates an old doctrine that dates back to the Spanish American War, whereby “debt accumulated by an odious regime [in that case Spain] that burdens rather than benefits the people of that nation should not be repaid.”¹⁷

Since the former governor of Puerto Rico declared the debt unsustainable in 2015, the decibels on the reporting of the debt load have significantly increased with no relief in sight. The press is now speaking of a debt load that has increased from \$73 billion to \$123 billion after adding unfunded pension liabilities to distressed municipal bonds.¹⁸ A financial oversight board

imposed on Puerto Rico by Congress to help resolve the financial situation, to restructure its debt outside the courts, is being widely criticized. On May 3 of 2017, Puerto Rico had to enter a process similar to bankruptcy to try to resolve its crisis in a New York Court. Economists paint a dire picture.¹⁹ Since 2006, the economy has shrunk by 9.4%, to the point that the latest 2017 Economic Activity Index is at May 1992 levels. The current Governor, Ricardo Roselló, has announced a budget plan that allocates only \$800 million to debt service, while also putting austerity measures in place. The budget claims to cut government expenses by 13%, to boost tax collection, and to reduce the budget for the University of Puerto Rico by 56%, but the budget is not based on audited numbers. Meanwhile, institutions like the Pew Research Center are calling attention to the massive exile of Puerto Ricans leaving the island for the U.S. mainland. One reads that Puerto Rico's population has fallen by 400,000 since its peak in 2004. The mass migration is striking. The population was 3.8 million in 2004, 3.4 million in 2016. The projection is that the population will decline to about 3 million in 2050.²⁰ Many political economists from the island and from the mainland join a Greek chorus crying that the debt is simply too great and servicing it is unsustainable.²¹ They also warn that the crisis is more than a financial problem. They add that the crisis is also ethical and moral, by which they mean that it is simply morally wrong to put servicing the debt before the well-being of the Puerto Rican people. And they call for a long-term economic development plan that is balanced, fair, and lasting based on the comparative advantage of Puerto Ricans.

How does an approach to the debt based on a Kristevan heretical ethics compare to the last minute ethical warnings of Governors like Alejandro García Padilla and Ricardo Roselló, Nobel-Prize winning economists like Joseph Stiglitz, University Professors like Gibran Cruz Martinez, and concerned residents like Miguel A. Soto-Class, the Executive Director and founder of the Center for a New Economy? I would argue that an approach based on a heretical ethics proposes that we live with our apoptotic debt. In addition, it also proposes that we repeat and sustain our cycles of sublimation. Such an approach has the potential of putting into question the reduction of the crisis by these experts to the present moment, their over reliance on ever more complicated and autistic actuarial analyses, and their simplistic moral equations drawn quickly and often added as an afterthought. An approach based on a heretical ethics also challenges the necrotic principles on which these well-meaning experts base their conclusions: namely, it asks the question whether indeed we are the sovereign, independent, rational and clear-thinking subjects, pure and eminently worthy and capable of salvation, that we think we are. It further suggests that we could do worse than toning down the apocalyptic and militant rhetoric provoked by these emergency proclamations. If apoptosis is indeed our inheritance, then perhaps we should cultivate a difficult silence, a slowing down, a pause, and an involution of our reactions. And whatever else we do to address the crisis, we should support the long tradition to write literature, compose music, and give visual form to

our phantasms, nightmares and illusions, against the current trend (both on the island and on the mainland) to de-fund the few remaining federal agencies that support the arts and the humanities.

Whether politicians and political parties warn of falling into a so-called death spiral, or whether they call for the outright rejection of a debt deemed unpayable, odious and toxic in the name of sovereignty and independence, they all leave unexamined a disturbing inheritance that *Necrópolis* and similar works explore and sublimate. The reduction of our ability to continue to work-through and sublimate this archaic and profound inheritance makes it more urgent that we stop disavowing our apoptotic inheritance, by calling our long-standing debts (financial or otherwise) “odious” and “unpayable,” and by repeating our necrotic ideals, including ideals of racial purity in the context of recent immigration debates. So long as works like *Necrópolis* remain possible, we will continue to express the maternal hold, and with it to transform in an ethical way the cycles of sublimation of our apoptotic inheritance, cycles of sublimation that are necessary for what Kristeva calls vital care.

¹ Julia Kristeva, “La reliance, ou de l’erotisme maternel,” *Revue française de psychanalyse*, vol. 75, no. 5 (2011): 156.

² Jean Claude Ameisen, *La Sculpture du Vivant; Le Suicide cellulaire ou la Mort créatrice* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2003).

³ See P.G.H. Clarke and S. Clarke, “Nineteenth Century Research on Cell Death,” *Experimental Oncology*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2012): 139-145.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987):251-252.

⁵ Kristeva, “La reliance,”156.

⁶ Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 253.

⁷ Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 263.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, “From Madonnas to Nudes; A Representation of Female Beauty,” in *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010): 71-76.

⁹ “Reliance, un film écrit par Julia Kristeva et réalisé par G.K. Galabov présenté au Congrès des psychanalystes de langue française, Paris, 5 juin, 2011.” Julia Kristeva, http://www.kristeva.fr/reliance_film_galabov.html. Accessed 4 September 2017.

¹⁰ Eduardo Lalo, *Necrópolis* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2014), 32.

¹¹ Lalo, *Necrópolis*, 32.

¹² Eduardo Lalo, *donde* (San Juan de Puerto Rico: Editorial Tal Cual, 2005), 197.

¹³ See Clarke, Ameisen.

¹⁴ Lalo, *donde*, 82; see this link to the photo, <https://drive.google.com/drive/my-drive?ogsrc=32>.

¹⁵ See the link to this drawing, <https://drive.google.com/drive/my-drive?ogsrc=32>.

¹⁶ The governor made the announcement one day before making public a report by three former International Monetary Fund officials titled “Puerto Rico - A Way Forward”. The Government Development Bank of Puerto Rico requested the report.. The report concluded that the current fiscal situation was unsustainable and recommended a comprehensive approach to the looming crisis that included structural reform, fiscal consolidation/debt restructuring, and institutional reform as well as some debt relief. But the Governor famously told the *New York Times*, “the debt is not payable...there is no other option.” Perhaps in order to justify the need for immediate debt relief, the Governor also stated that the island was close to a “death spiral.” He repeated this last phrase on several occasions, including in an interview with CNN in Spanish in December of 2015, in a meeting with the federal oversight board appointed by Congress in October of 2016, and in another meeting with the oversight board in November 21st of 2016.

¹⁷ Ora Bannan, Natasha Lycia. “Puerto Rico’s Odious Debt: The Economic Crisis of Colonialism,” *CUNY Law Review*, vol. 19 (2016): 287-311, cited at 288.

¹⁸ Nathaniel Parish Flannery, “Will Puerto Rico Find a Way to Survive its Debt Crisis?” *Forbes*, June 1, 2017.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanielparishflannery/2017/06/01/will-puerto-rico-find-a-way-to-survive-its-debt-crisis/#570ea8f05b90>. Accessed 11 November 2018.

¹⁹ For other examples of this necrotic trend see Ed Morales, “The Roots of Puerto Rico’s Debt Crisis - and Why Austerity Will Not Solve It,” *The Nation*, July 8, 2015. <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-roots-of-puerto-ricos-debt-crisis-and-why-austerity-will-not-solve-it/>. Accessed 4 September, 2017. “Puerto Rico in crisis: weighed down by \$73bn debt as unemployment hits 14%.” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/28/puerto-rico-debt-unemployment>. Accessed 4 September, 2017. “Puerto Rico’s Political and Economic Crisis Deepens.” *The Nation*, May 24, 2017.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/puerto-ricos-political-economic-crisis-deepens>. Accessed 4 September, 2017.

²⁰ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/29/key-findings-about-puerto-rico/>. Accessed November 11 2018.

²¹ “Debt, Austerity and Growth - Joseph Stiglitz in San Juan.” *Center for a New Economy*. May 21, 2017.

<http://grupocne.org/2017/05/21/debt-austerity-and-growth-joseph-stiglitz-in-san-juan>. Accessed 5 Sept 2017.